

With Edged Tools

By HENRY SETON MERRIMAN

Author of "The Sowers," "Roden's Corner," "From One Generation to Another," Etc.

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Nala squatted on the ennumoor and proceeded to unfold a leaf. The operation took some time. Within the outer covering there was a second envelope of paper, likewise secured by a string. Finally the man produced a small note, which showed signs of having been read more than once. This he handed to Jocelyn with an assured air of importance.

She opened the paper and read: To Marie, at Msala—Send at once to Mr. Durnovo, informing him that the tribes have risen and are rapidly surrounding the plateau. He must return here at once with as large an armed force as he can raise, but the most important consideration is time. He must not wait for men from elsewhere, but must pick up as many as he can in Loango and on the way up to Msala. I reckon that we can hold out for three months without outside assistance, but after that period we shall be forced to surrender or try to cut our way through without the simlacine. With a larger force we could beat back the tribes and establish our hold on the plateau by force of arms. This must be forwarded to Mr. Durnovo at once, wherever he is. The letter is duplicate, sent by two good messengers, who go by different routes.

JOHN MERRIDITH.

When Jocelyn looked up, dry lips, breathless, Nala was standing before her, beaming with self-importance. "Who gave you this?" "Marie, at Msala." "Who is she?" "Oh, Mr. Durnovo's woman at Msala. She keeps his house."

"But this letter is for Mr. Durnovo!" cried Jocelyn, whose fear made her unreasonably angry. "Why has he not had it?"

Nala came nearer, with upraised forefinger and explanatory palm. "Marie tell me," she said, "that Mr. Meredith sent two letters. Marie give Mr. Durnovo one. This—other letter," Jocelyn Gordon rose to the occasion. "Can you go," she said after a moment's thought, "to St. Paul de Loanda for me, at once—now?"

"Oh, yes," with a sigh. Already Jocelyn was writing something on a sheet of paper.

"Take this," she said, "to the telegraph office at St. Paul de Loanda and send it off at once. Here is money. You understand? I will pay you when you bring back the receipt. If you have been very quick I will pay you well."

That same evening a second messenger started northward after Maurice Gordon with a letter telling him to come back at once to Loango.

Guy Oscar was dining alone in Russell square when a telegram was handed to him. He opened it and read: Meredith surrounded and in danger. Durnovo false. Come at once. JOCELYN GORDON.

In due time Guy Oscar landed on the beach at Loanda. He had the telegram still in his pocket, and he went, not to Maurice Gordon's office, but to the bungalow.

Jocelyn greeted him with a little inarticulate cry of joy.

"I did not think that you could possibly be here so soon," she said.

"What news have you?" she asked, without pausing to explain. He was one of those men who are silenced by an unlimited capacity for prompt action.

"That," she replied, handing him the note written by Jack Meredith to Marie at Msala.

Guy Oscar read it carefully. "Dated seven weeks last Monday; nearly two months ago," he muttered half to himself.

"But you will go?" she said, and something in her voice startled him.

"Of course I will go," he replied. He looked down into her face with a vague question in his quiet eyes, and who knows what he saw there? Perhaps she was off her guard. Perhaps she read this man aright and did not care.

With a certain slow hesitation he laid his hand on her arm. There was something almost paternal in his manner which was in keeping with his stature.

"Moreover," he went on, "I will get there in time. I have an immense respect for Meredith. If he said that he could hold out for four months I should

say that he could hold out for six. There is no one like Meredith once he makes up his mind to take things seriously."

It was not very well done, and she probably saw through it. She probably knew that he was as anxious as she was herself. But his very presence was full of comfort. It somehow brought a change to the moral atmosphere.

"Where is Durnovo?" Oscar asked

suddenly. "I believe he is in Loango. It is not likely," she went on, "that he will come here. I—I rather lost my temper with him and said things which I imagine hurt his feelings."

"I'm rather afraid of doing that myself," he said; "only it will not be his feelings."

"I do not think," she replied, "that it would be at all expedient to say or do anything at present. He must go with you to the plateau. Afterward—perhaps."

Oscar laughed quietly. "Ah," he said, "that sounds like one of Meredith's propositions. But he does not mean it any more than you do."

"I do mean it," replied Jocelyn quietly. There is no hatred so complete, so merciless, as the hatred of a woman for one who has wronged the man she loves. At such times women do not pause to give fair play. They make no allowance.

Guy Oscar smiled. "I think I will go and look for him," he said.

At dusk that same evening there was a singular incident in the barroom of the only hotel in Loango.

Victor Durnovo was there, surrounded by a few friends of antecedents and blood similar to his own. They were having a convivial time of it, and the consumption of whisky was greater than might be deemed discreet in such a climate as that of Loango.

Durnovo was in the act of raising his glass to his lips when the open doorway was darkened and Guy Oscar stood before him. The half-breed's jaw dropped; the glass was set down again rather unsteadily on the zinc covered counter.

"I want you," said Oscar.

There was a little pause, an ominous silence, and Victor Durnovo slowly followed Oscar out of the room, leaving that ominous silence behind.

"I leave for Msala tonight," said Oscar when they were outside, "and you are coming with me."

"I'll see you cursed first!" replied Durnovo, with a courage born of Irish whisky.

Guy Oscar said nothing, but he stretched out his right hand suddenly. His fingers closed in the collar of Victor Durnovo's coat, and that particular section of two races found himself feebly trotting the one street of Loango.

"Le go!" he gasped.

But the hand at his neck neither relinquished nor contracted. When they reached the beach the embarkation of the little army was going forward under Maurice Gordon's supervision. Victor looked at Gordon. He reflected over the trump card held in his hand, but he was too skillful to play it then.

CHAPTER XVI.

It was nearly dark when the little coast steamer secured by Maurice Gordon for the service turned her prow northward and steamed away.

"The truth is," Durnovo took an early opportunity of saying to Oscar, "that my nerve is no longer up to this work. I should not care to undertake this business alone, despite my reputation on the coast. It is a wonderful thing how closely the nerves are allied to the state of one's health."

"Wonderful!" acquiesced Guy Oscar, with a lack of irony which only made the irony keener.

"I've been too long in this country," exclaimed Durnovo. "That's the fact. I'm not the man I was."

Guy Oscar smoked for some moments in silence, then he took his pipe from his lips.

"The only pity is," he said judicially, "that you ever undertook to look for the simlacine if you were going to funk it when the first difficulty arose."

Without further comment he walked away and entered into conversation with the captain of the steamer.

"All right," muttered Durnovo between his teeth—"all right, my sarcastic, grand gentleman. I'll be even with you yet."

In due time Msala was reached. As the canoes suitable for up river traffic were by no means sufficient to transport the whole of the expeditionary force in one journey, a division was made. Durnovo took charge of the advance column, journeying up to the camp from which the long march through the forest was to begin, and sending back the canoes for Oscar and the remainder of the force. With these canoes he sent back word that the hostile tribes were within a few days' march, and that he was fortifying his camp.

This news seemed to furnish Guy Oscar with food for considerable thought, and after some space of time he called Marie.

She came, and standing before him with her patient dignity of mien, awaited his communication. She never took her eyes off the letter in his hand. Oscar noticed the persistency of her gaze at the time and remembered it again afterward.

"Marie," he said, "I have had rather serious news from Mr. Durnovo. It will not be safe for you to stay at Msala. You must take the children down to Loango. I will send two men down with you, and will give you a letter to Miss Gordon, who will see to your wants at Loango."

"Yes," said she softly, "I know." And she went into the house.

The next morning brought further rumors of approaching danger, and it seemed certain that this news must have filtered through Durnovo's fortified camp farther up the river. This time the report was more definite.

There were Arabs leading the tribes, and rumor further stated that an organized descent on Msala was intended. And yet there was no word from Durnovo; no sign to suggest that he had even thought of securing the safety of his housekeeper and the few

aged negroes in charge of Msala. This news only strengthened Oscar's determination to send Marie down to the coast, and he personally superintended their departure before taking his seat in the canoe for the up river voyage. The men of his division had all preceded him, and no one except his own boatmen knew that Msala was to be abandoned.

Despite disquieting rumors, the expedition was allowed to depart from the river camp unmolested. For two days they marched through the gloomy forest with all speed. On the third day one of the men of Durnovo's division captured a native who had been prowling on their heels in the line of march. Victor Durnovo sent captor and prisoner to the front of the column, with a message to Oscar that he would come presently and see what information was to be abstracted from the captive. At the midday halt Durnovo accordingly joined Oscar, and the man was brought before them. He was hardly worthy of the name, so disease stricken, so miserable and half starved was he.

"Ask him," said Oscar, "whether he knows that there is an Englishman with a large force on the top of a mountain far to the east."

Durnovo translated, and the man answered with a smile. In reply to some further question the negro launched into a detailed narrative, to which Durnovo listened eagerly.

"He says," said the latter to Oscar, "that the plateau is in possession of the Masais. It was taken two months ago. The blacks were sold as slaves; the two Englishmen were tortured to death and their bodies burned."

Oscar never moved a muscle.

"Ask him if he is quite sure about it."

"Quite," replied Durnovo after questioning. What a pity! But I always knew it. I knew it was quite hopeless from the first."

He passed his brown hand nervously over his face, where the perspiration stood in beads.

"Yes," said Oscar slowly, "but I think we will go on all the same."

"What?" cried Durnovo. "Go on?"

"Yes," replied Guy Oscar, "we will go on, and if I find you trying to desert I'll shoot you down like a rat."

"About as bad as they can be, sir. That's how things are." Joseph set down his master's breakfast on the rough table that stood in front of his tent and looked at Jack Meredith.

Meredith had a way of performing most of his toilet outside his tent, and while Joseph made his discouraging report he was engaged in buttoning his waistcoat. He nodded gravely, but his manner was not that of a man who fully realized his position of imminent danger. Some men are like this. They die without getting at all dustered.

"There's not more nor two or three out of the whole lot that I can put any trust in," continued Joseph. Jack Meredith was putting on his coat.

"I know what a barrack room mutiny is. I've felt it in the atmosphere, so to speak, before now, sir."

"And what does it feel like?" inquired Jack Meredith, lightly arranging his watch chain.

But Joseph did not answer. He stepped backward into the tent and brought two rifles. There was no need of answer, for this came in the sound of many voices the clang and clatter of varied arms.

"Here you come, sir," said the soldier servant, respectfully mindful of his place even at this moment.

Jack Meredith merely sat down behind the little table where his breakfast stood untouched. He leaned his elbow on the table and watched the approach of the disorderly band of blacks. Some ran, some lunged back, but all were armed.

In front walked a small, truculent looking man with broad shoulders and an aggressive head.

He planted himself before Meredith, and, turning with a wave of the hand to indicate his followers, said in English:

"These men, these friends of me, say they are tired of you. You no good leader. They make me their leader."

He shrugged his shoulders with a hideous grin of deprecation.

"I not want. They make me. We go to join our friends in the valley."

He pointed down into the valley where the enemy was encamped.

"We have agreed to take £200 for you. Price given by our friends in valley."

The man stopped suddenly. He was looking into the muzzle of a revolver with a fixed fascination. Jack Meredith exhibited no haste. He did not seem yet to have realized the gravity of the situation. He took very careful aim and pulled the trigger. A little puff of white smoke floated over their heads. The broad shouldered man with the aggressive head looked stupidly surprised. He turned toward his supporters with a pained look of inquiry, as if there was something he did not quite understand, and then he fell on his face and lay quite still.

Jack Meredith looked on the blank faces with a glance of urbane inquiry. "Has anybody else anything to say to me?" he asked.

There was a dead silence. Some one laughed rather feebly in the background.

"Then I think I will go on with my breakfast."

Which he accordingly proceeded to do.

One or two of the mutineers dropped away and went back to their own quarters.

"Take it away," said Meredith, indicating the body of the dead man with his teaspoon.

"And, look here," he cried out after them, "do not let us have any more of this nonsense! It will only lead to unpleasantness."

Some of the men grinned. They were not particularly respectful in their manner of bearing away the mortal remains of their late leader. The feeling had already turned.

The position was not a pleasant one. For three months the plateau had been



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surrounded by hostile tribes, who made salutary raids from time to time. These the little force on the summit was able to repulse, but a combined attack from, say, two sides at once would certainly have been successful. Meredith had no reason to suppose that his appeal for help had reached Msala, infested as the intervening forests were by cannibal tribes. Provisions were at a low ebb. There seemed to be no hope of outside aid, and disaffection was rife in his small force. Jack Meredith, who was no soldier, found himself called upon to defend a weak position, with unreliable men, for an indefinite period.

Joseph had a rough knowledge of soldiering and a very rudimentary notion of fortification. But he had that which served as well—the unerring eye for covert—of a marksman. And he was a dead shot at any range, and knowing what he could hit, he also knew how to screen himself from the rifle of an enemy.

Above all, perhaps, was the quiet influence of a man who never flinched from danger or seemed to be in the least disconcerted by its presence.

"It seems, sir," said Joseph to his master later in the day, "that you've kinder stumped them. They don't on derstand you."

"They must be kept in check by fear. There is no other way," replied Meredith rather wearily. Of late he had felt less and less inclined to exert himself.

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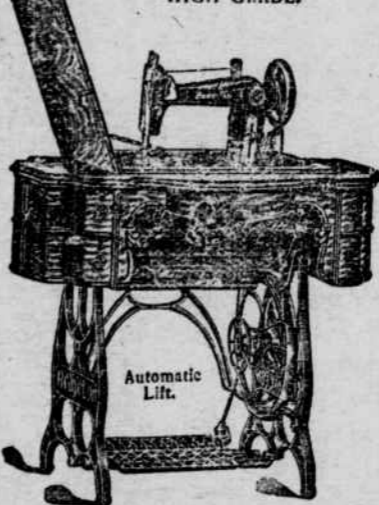
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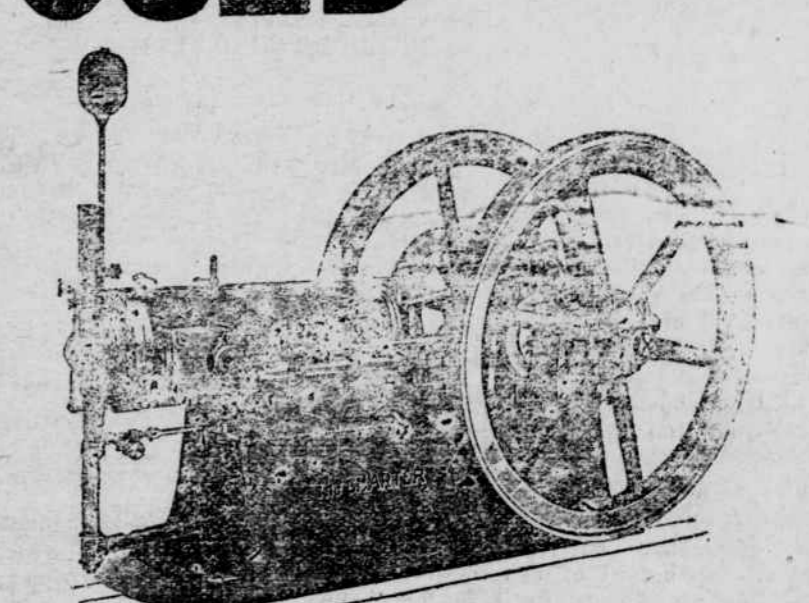
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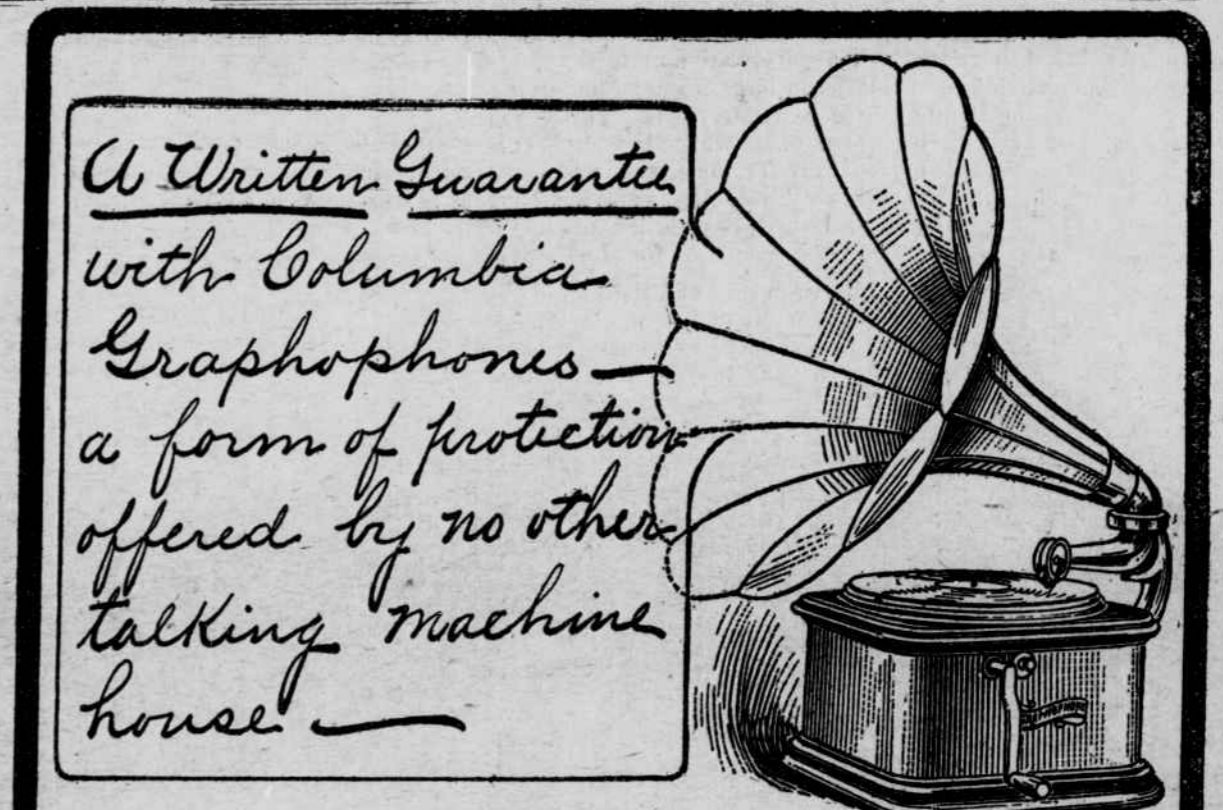


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